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**CHARLES DE GAULLE:  
FRANCE'S BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE**

Core Course I Essay

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## Charles de Gaulle: France's Bridge to the Future

In 1945, the end of World War II found France laid low once again, much as she had been in 1815 after Waterloo, in 1871 after Sedan, and in 1918 after the Western Front. She had had enough--her industry was in shambles, her agriculture destroyed, her infrastructure nearly non-existent, her military weak and divided, and, perhaps most importantly, her spirit broken. Into this scene entered a man who refused to accept the inevitability of France's demise, who had a vision of a France that was new in texture, yet married to the ideals of nationalism and greatness tied to the France of old. That man, Charles de Gaulle, succeeded like few other statesmen have; he bridged the gap between the French concept of an imperial France that died in 1940 and the strong, confident France we know today.

De Gaulle accomplished this reversal of national decline by a combination of iron will and diplomatic talent. As a foundation, he drew on France's past and on his own experiences. French culture, especially its strategic culture, is one of extremes, perhaps flowing from a national penchant for the dramatic flair.<sup>1</sup> In responding to defeats from 1870 to 1940, for example, French strategists took the lessons of the last war to their logical extreme, and in doing so set the stage for their next disappointment.<sup>2</sup> De Gaulle, a product of that culture and especially its military, also tended to take issues to the extreme.<sup>3</sup> It was the lessons of his life, especially of World War II, combined with his love of France that gave direction to that extremism. The French were treated like second class allies throughout the war (largely because they were second class), including the

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<sup>1</sup>Charles G. Cogan, "The Break-Up: General de Gaulle's Separation from Power," Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. 27, 1992, pp. 170-171 provides a concise discussion of this aspect of French culture and de Gaulle's use of it for his purposes.

<sup>2</sup>The notion of extremism in military doctrine forms the central theme of David Yost, "The French Way of War," Hudson Institute, (presented at the Conference of the International Studies Assn., Philadelphia, Pa., 18-21 March, 1981).

<sup>3</sup>However, he was more intellectually flexible than his countrymen. He early on supported the doctrines of armored warfare espoused by Liddell Hart, and in fact made recommendations to the French high command which, if followed, might have staved off defeat in 1940. See Elie Kedourie, "De Gaulle," Commentary, January, 1993, pp. 44-45.

destruction of a large portion of their navy by the allies in North Africa and some early thought about occupying France like a defeated enemy.<sup>4</sup> This treatment left an indelible imprint on de Gaulle's mind throughout the remainder of his life.<sup>5</sup> History added more. To de Gaulle, France's experience confirmed that collective security was a chimera; reliance on allies left a nation vulnerable to aggression. In 1914-1918, France's allies were too late to stop the slaughter of a generation of Frenchmen. In 1940, America's isolation and England's weakness stole from France the aid she needed to oppose Germany. A nation's leaders were duty bound to provide for the security of their country, so henceforth, for de Gaulle, alliances and collective security would serve only the interests of France, not of the greater world community.<sup>6</sup>

To Charles de Gaulle, nothing was more important in 1945, and again in 1958, than the restoration of national self confidence. Without restoring faith in the Frenchness of France and in the future of the nation, "...France would cease to be her 'true' self and follow her 'unnatural' but persistent inclination toward decline, disorder, self-effacement, and renunciation of responsibility."<sup>7</sup> France stood at a fork in the road. Down one lane lay continued decay and ultimate national oblivion. Down the other lay a new France that, while no longer an imperial power, was a key actor among the major powers in international politics. It was de Gaulle who

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<sup>4</sup>On the destruction of their navy, see Samuel Eliot Morison, "Operations in North African Waters, October 1942-June 1943", in History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. 2, (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1947), pp. 91-114. On Roosevelt's early preferences for dealing with France in the same way that Italy had been handled, see Gaddis Smith, American Diplomacy During the Second World War, 1941-1945, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), p. 133; and Kedourie, p. 46.

<sup>5</sup>Kedourie, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup>The theme of betrayal and the consequent need for self-reliance is consistent throughout most of the post-war French defense debate. Whether Gaullist, Atlanticist, or Europeanist, the one common thread is the need for some self-reliance in security. That this skepticism fit in nicely with de Gaulle's quest for independence made for a convenient marriage in his security strategy. See particularly Michael Harrison, The Reluctant Ally, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 57-58. Note also that the above discussion is taken from de Gaulle's perspective, and does not address the obvious (to us foreigners) French failures in both world wars.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 52.

saw both the need and the way to bridge that gap in time. Power was the key ingredient; independent, autonomous, national power. Power would give France security and a place on the world stage. Of greatest importance, however, power would give the French the pride and spirit so desperately needed if they were to survive as a nation. In that sense, the success of the enterprise mattered less than the mere attempt.<sup>8</sup>

Power, in de Gaulle's mind, was defined primarily as military power, and military power after 1945 meant atomic weapons.<sup>9</sup> France's treatment by her Anglo-Saxon allies in World War II had taught de Gaulle that a nation without military power simply was not a player in the world game. More importantly, the only way to truly guarantee France's security and independence was for France to have the flexibility to unilaterally counter threats to herself, and in the nuclear age, that required the independent development of a nuclear deterrent force. Collective security would not suffice, for when push came to shove, France could not rely on her allies to be there. She had to have the option of a national nuclear deterrent as a fall back. While providing security, the independent nuclear deterrent would also move France back into the camp of the major powers, and that, to close the logical circle, would work to restore French self-esteem and dignity.

A national nuclear deterrent force, though by no means comparable to that of the superpowers, would, in de Gaulle's view, provide leverage in two key areas. First, independent French nuclear weapons would tend to offset the bipolarity of superpower confrontation. That confrontation, de Gaulle felt, increasingly took place outside of Europe, and involved issues irrelevant to European security. However, because Europe was the contact point between the superpowers while itself possessing no significant deterrent, confrontations outside of Europe had

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<sup>8</sup>On the importance of independent national power and its impact on French self esteem, see Harrison, pp. 50-52.

<sup>9</sup>It was de Gaulle who, as Prime Minister in 1945, set France on the road to the development of its own nuclear capability. Colette Barbier, "The French Decision to Develop a Military Nuclear Programme in the 1950s," Diplomacy & Statecraft, Vol. 4, No. 1, March 1993, pp. 103-107. See also Harrison, pp. 55-56.

the potential of being played out by war on European territory.<sup>10</sup> An autonomous, and therefore largely unpredictable, French nuclear deterrent would increase the uncertainty and potential costs to both superpowers of any war fought in Europe.<sup>11</sup> A second role for military power, and its heavy nuclear component, was its ability to confer status on its owner in a myriad of areas. Military power, in de Gaulle's mind, was fungible across issue boundaries.<sup>12</sup> It would give France influence in such diverse areas as the ongoing wars of decolonization, the development of world economic order, the United Nations, and as the champion of Third World nations. All of these, in turn, would reinforce France's self-image of grandeur, serving that greatest of Gaullist interests, the national *élan*.

Seeing the world through the eyes of a 19th century realist, de Gaulle believed that the key operator in international relations was the balance of power.<sup>13</sup> His hope was to make France, and ultimately a federated Europe, the balancer between the Soviets on one side and what he termed the Anglo-Saxon hegemony on the other.<sup>14</sup> To de Gaulle, nations had neither friends nor enemies, only interests. When it served France's interest to support the NATO allies, France would do so. However, it was to be France and not some supra-national organization that would decide which actions were in the nation's interest. De Gaulle saw the alliance as necessary for ultimate security, but also saw the need for autonomy in the majority of instances. The lessons of World War II

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<sup>10</sup>One of de Gaulle's primary lessons from the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Cook, pp. 355-356.

<sup>11</sup>Because British nuclear forces came under NATO command, and were therefore controlled by the Americans, De Gaulle lumped both British and American nuclear forces together. British forces, therefore, did not serve the function of an independent European deterrent. Don Cook, Charles de Gaulle: A Biography, (Brandt & Brandt Literary Agents, 1983), pp. 353-354 and pp. 359-360.

<sup>12</sup>Harrison, p. 56.

<sup>13</sup>Cook, p. 356.

<sup>14</sup>Ironically, this concept was also one of George Kennan's key themes in developing America's containment strategy. See John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 41-42.

were too stark in his memory to let him rely too heavily on others for his security. Only independent military power could provide security. France, as a medium power, could best employ her limited resources by acting as the fulcrum in balancing the strengths of the two superpowers.

Perhaps as no other statesman of the period, de Gaulle understood where he wanted to take his nation, and of the terrible price if he failed in his efforts. Nothing would stand in his way, just as nothing had during the war. This time, France would emerge a great power, if not in fact, then in the eyes of the world, and most importantly in the eyes of her people. He would lead France into a new era, stripped of imperial ambitions, but self-reliant, confident and sound. The difficulty, of course, lay in the method of obtaining more power than what one's resources could supply. To this dilemma, de Gaulle brought not only his personal experience during World War II, but also France's historical experience. Playing on the margins of a bipolar world, enticing, antagonizing, opposing and disrupting, de Gaulle came to command a disproportionate amount of the international agenda. He kept his opponents on the "horns of a dilemma," never quite understanding where he was going or why. This is the same strategy that had been espoused for over a century by French naval strategists of the *Jeune Ecole*: Be just strong enough to threaten the opponent, and you will effectively accrue more power than indicated by the sum of your resources.<sup>15</sup> De Gaulle, in essence, made up for France's lack of actual resources through a strategy of opposition.<sup>16</sup> It was a strategy brilliant in its conception--if obvious to de Gaulle--because it could be understood by his countrymen, but not quite comprehended by the rest of the world.

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<sup>15</sup>See Theodore Ropp, "Continental Doctrines of Sea Power," in E. M. Earle, ed., Makers of Modern Strategy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), pp. 446-456.

<sup>16</sup>Harrison, p. 51.

Briefly, then, De Gaulle's objectives were to restore French national spirit, ensure her security, and play a significant role on the international stage. The strategy he elected to follow entailed French autonomy in military affairs, flexibility in commitments and the withdrawal from the command structure of NATO, the offer of a counterweight to the superpower balance, the offer of strong leadership for a European security entity, and championship of the emerging independent nations of the Third World.<sup>17</sup> Tactically, he accelerated development of nuclear weapons, took steps to dismantle the empire, strengthened the French presidency so as to form a stronger and more durable republic, and sought at every opportunity to assert his independence.

The tools he used were many, and were used to great effect. In perhaps his greatest speech, de Gaulle appeared on television and radio on 23 April, 1961 to appeal to the French people and French colonial troops in Algeria to support his vision of France and to disavow any allegiance to a group of army generals who were trying to topple the 5th Republic in response to his policies in Algeria. "Look where France risks going, in contrast to what she was about to become!"<sup>18</sup> The drama was all de Gaulle, the effect was electric--the revolt collapsed, the army, for the first time since Napoleon, came firmly under civilian control, and Algeria was severed from cosmopolitan France. In one masterful stroke, he pulled the whole country in behind him, appealing to individuals over the heads of the political and military elite. It was one of the first uses of such mass communication, and it worked.

De Gaulle was also a master of personal diplomacy. He skillfully played such key leaders as Eisenhower, Macmillan of England, Adenauer of Germany, and Khrushchev of the Soviet Union against one another. Whether wooing Germany, standing firm on Berlin or supporting détente with the Soviets, ostracizing England, or suggesting a joint British/French strategic

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<sup>17</sup>Cook, p. 350.

<sup>18</sup>Alistair Home, A Savage War of Peace, 1954-1962, (London: Macmillan Ltd., 1977), p. 455.



deterrent, he worked the world's powers against each other much like Bismarck had done a century before. By the turmoil these skillful maneuvers caused, no combination of powers could concentrate against France. Much like in the 18th and 19th centuries, this gave France what he hoped it would: her independence and security. Another tool was his use of press conferences, where he rigged questions, then answered them by way of long lectures about his policies. To these devices, De Gaulle added world trips and forays into various multinational fora. He would use any venue to get his point across. The effectiveness of his style, however, lay in the consistency of his vision and the salience of his objective. Only toward the end of his career in the mid-1960s did he begin to lose sight of his goals and let his frustrations and resentments get the better of his judgment.<sup>19</sup>

That de Gaulle was successful in attaining his primary objectives is clear. France regained her self esteem and her security, and she became a major player in international politics. Even his efforts to create a European pillar to counter the weight of the superpowers came close to success, and may yet come to pass. Ridding France of her empire, which had become nothing but a drain on an already weak economy and which alienated a significant portion of the army, allowed concentration on rebuilding the army into the fine fighting force that it is today, and gave credibility to his claim that France was to be the champion of the 3rd World.<sup>20</sup> The consummate realist, de Gaulle sided with the allies when they needed him, as in Berlin in 1961 and Cuba in 1962, but also felt free to maneuver independently when the interests of France so dictated. This ostensible inconsistency in French policy went far to give France that apparent power that exceeded her real power. Uncertainty in dealing with an opponent generates caution and limits

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<sup>19</sup>Michael D. Mosettig, review of "*De Gaulle The Ruler, 1945-1970*," by Jean Lacouture, in *Europe*, Mar 93, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup>Jean-Marie Domenach, "The French Army in Politics," *Foreign Affairs*, January, 1961, pp. 186-195, provides a superb analysis of the divisive impact of the colonial wars on the French army. Kedourie, p. 49, discusses de Gaulle's motives in ridding France of the empire.

freedom of action. That is what both the Soviets and the Americans had to deal with, and it is that which conferred additional "power" on France.

Yet, despite his obvious skill and the single-minded pursuit of his objectives, de Gaulle never could overcome the strength of the bipolar world. He could ensure French security only so far, then he had to rely on the Americans. Likewise, he could operate independently only so far. In the end, the military weakness of Europe and the overwhelming strength of the two superpowers were more than poor France could counter. One could argue, however, that had he not made the efforts he did, his nation never would have regained that self esteem so essential to the continued viability of France. He used the establishment of France as a player in the world and the growth of her apparent power as a means of softening the blow of France's fall to the level of a second class power. In this way, he successfully bridged the gap between imperial France and the modern economic France of today. For the first time since the zenith of Napoleon, France became a proud country with a secure and strong government. Since then, France has prospered.

The statecraft of Charles de Gaulle has many lessons for strategists. Perhaps the most significant lesson is the importance of personal leadership and interpersonal relations in foreign affairs. Individual people do make a difference. Their relationships with other leaders can effect the balance of any situation, and confound even the most rigorous of theories of international relations. Besides de Gaulle's influence, the impact of other leaders such as Churchill, Roosevelt, Sadat, and even Hitler serves as ample proof of this fact. A strategist who does not take account of the personalities involved in an issue risks undermining the foundation of his strategy.

A second lesson involves timing. Just as in military operations, knowing when to strike is as important as knowing where and how. Moving fast when you need to, or having patience when it is best to allow a situation to develop, are true force multipliers. They allow you to set the agenda, and to fight your battles on terrain of your own choosing. To exploit opportunities in this manner, however, the strategist must have a clear understanding of the nature of the world around

him. Knowing the motivations of various actors, the coin of power (economic, military, social, etc.), and the relationships between all of these is essential. De Gaulle's clear picture of the world as basically power based was enough to give him the clues as to his action. Not everyone may have agreed with his interpretation, but it served him extremely well.

Finally, and most importantly, de Gaulle's techniques teach us how to obtain our goals with a minimum of resources. He always started from a clear understanding of his objectives and an astute assessment of the inter-relationships of world affairs. He then advanced along a broad front, using every forum available. In the best traditions of Sun Tzu and Liddell Hart, he then kept his opponents effectively controlled by confusion and deception.<sup>21</sup> They seldom knew exactly where he was headed, mainly because they could, or would, never understand why he was doing what he was. As World War II taught him, he saw the opportunity to gain something from nothing, to parlay weakness into strength, through a policy of disruption and opposition.

Charles de Gaulle, a man conditioned by history, yet a man who surpassed that conditioning to shape a new France, exemplifies the personal actor in international relations. He achieved some of his goals, failed to meet others. In the end, however, he left a legacy that continues to strengthen France:

"Even more enduring is a strong French government, a modern economy, a cohesive society, and a country capable of playing a creative, if sometimes annoying, role in world diplomacy."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Sun Tzu, The Art of War, ed. by James Clavell, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1983); and B. H. Liddell Hart, Strategy, 2nd Edition, (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967).

<sup>22</sup>Mosettig, p. 46.

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